

Chapter 32

Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology: The Principle of Intentionality and the Methods of Reduction

Key Words:

presuppositionless philosophy, consciousness, phenomena, intentionality principle, intentional in-existence, essences, natural attitude, bracketing, *Epoche*, phenomenological-psychological reduction, eidetic reduction, transcendental reduction, transcendental ego.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is widely known as the founder of modern phenomenology, a highly influential movement in 20th century western philosophy. Husserl was one of the prominent European thinkers of 20th century and the movement has inspired thinkers from different streams. Though we consider Husserl as the founder of phenomenology, the approach and method we call as phenomenological are not his exclusive invention. Many thinkers and philosophers like Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Mach have referred to the term phenomenology in their writings before Husserl used it in a more systematic way. But it was Husserl who developed it into a systematic philosophical approach and method with certain definite goals. All major contributions in this area are from Edmund Husserl in whose writings it appears as a philosophy and as a method. Husserl further conceived phenomenology as a foundational science and as a presuppositionless philosophy.

Husserl was primarily a mathematician and logician. He was the student of the great German philosopher and psychologist Franz Brentano, who had famously reintroduced the intentionality principle. Husserl was also influenced by the empiricism of David Hume. He found the predominant naturalism and historicism in German thought objectionable and became interested in exploring the foundations of mathematics. This interest has led him to study logic and finally epistemology and philosophy.

What is Phenomenology?

Husserl conceived phenomenology in three important ways. Firstly, it was conceived as the science of sciences, which endeavoured to discover the basis of

consciousness. In the second view, phenomenology was conceived as a first philosophy and therefore, it is coextensive with philosophy, as traditionally it was the latter which had been enjoying the status of first philosophy. The third conception of phenomenology is the most important one, where it is conceived as a transcendental idealism. This view conceives the transcendental ego as the source of all meaning.

As a philosophy, phenomenology initiates a break from many traditional concerns and inaugurates a new way of thinking. It was one of the most influential philosophical movements of 20th century western philosophy, as it inspired the emergence of many other movements in philosophy like Existentialism and Hermeneutics. Phenomenology was introduced at a time when philosophical thinking was facing a crisis and it has given a new life to German philosophy, which had lost its glory with the decline of the great idealistic tradition.

As the name indicates, the subject matter of phenomenology is the idea of phenomena, which according to Husserl, refers to ourselves, other people and the objects and events around us. It also includes the reflection of our own conscious experiences, as we experience them. According to Husserl, phenomena constitute the things *as* they are given to our consciousness, whether in perception or imagination or thought or volition. The fundamental objective of phenomenology is to study the phenomena, which is experienced in various acts of consciousness.

In this sense there are two types of phenomena; mental and physical. Mental phenomena constitute of what occur in the mind when we experience something. They also include the acts of consciousness, or its contents. On the other hand, physical phenomena include the objects of external perception starting with colors and shapes.

Phenomenology envisages isolating phenomena by suspending all consideration of their objective reality or subjective association. Here the phenomenologist is involved in a search for certainty. In this sense by equating phenomenology with philosophy, the latter is conceived as a rigorous science dealing with ideal objects or essences of things originating in the consciousness.

In developing the concept of phenomena, Husserl was influenced by Brentano, who made a distinction between psychological phenomena from physical phenomena. Brentano found that the psychological is different from the physical, as the former is characterized by what is known as intentionality. Brentano says that the mental phenomena exist intentionally in acts of consciousness, a phenomenon which is known as intentional in-existence.

Brentano and Husserl maintain that every mental phenomenon, or act of consciousness, is directed toward some object. They are about something that lies outside. While for Brentano, this is the feature of all psychological phenomena, Husserl replaces psychical phenomena with experiences or intentional experiences. The thesis of intentional directedness constitute the core of Brentano's descriptive psychology and according to Husserl, our consciousness is always intentional and it aims at or refers to something objective

The Principle of Intentionality

The phenomenological account of experience asserts two things. Firstly, it claims that everyday experiences are intentional. Secondly, it affirms that experiences always reveal their objects from a perspective. Hence the phenomenological account of intentionality reconciles the objectivism of intentionality with perspectivism of empiricism.

The principle of intentionality asserts that consciousness is always 'consciousness about' something. This aboutness of consciousness points to something outside the mind which is conscious of the object. The intentionality principle underlines the fact that our everyday experiences are directed towards objects, properties and states of affairs. At the same time, objects are revealed from definite perspectives. There seems to be a contradiction between the definite directedness of consciousness and the perspectivism of experiences. Husserl argues that, though experience reveals its object from a perspective, we are intentionally directed toward a full three-dimensional object. The different modes of consciousness we may have when we love, hate, desire, present, wonder etc. are all about something. Hence all objects of experience are presented to consciousness as transcending. They are presented as going beyond

the experience we have of them. Though all our experiences are perspectival, they also present their objects to us as transcending the perspective. For instance, when we see a tree, we do not see a mere image of the tree or a packet of sense data, but we see the tree itself. Of course the tree is seen from a definite perspective and only those parts of the tree that are visible from our perspective are seen by us. But Husserl asserts that, the whole tree is given to the consciousness as an intentional object. Hence phenomenology goes beyond mere empiricism. It goes beyond the image theory proposed by empiricism.

Husserl argues that perception enables us to go beyond the image, which is present to us. We relate ourselves to the object itself as an image to a certain extra conscious object. Husserl claims that in intentional experiences, we do not get raw, uninterrupted images in consciousness. Instead, we get the data that are already interpreted as images of some objects or other.

Brentano, while introducing the notion of intentionality had asserted that consciousness was essentially intentional and argued that every mental phenomenon was characterized by the intentional inexistence of an object. It is directed toward an object or immanent objectivity. According to Brentano, every mental phenomenon contains something as an object within itself, although not everyone does so in the same way. This object, argues Brentano, is the reference to a content. Brentano's intentionality principle thus aims at distinguishing the psychical from the physical. Brentano thus initiates a study on the nature of consciousness and also on the phenomena as they are directly given to consciousness. He argues that every mental state contains its object completely within itself as an intentional object is immanent to the mental state.

While adopting the principle of intentionality as a central doctrine in his phenomenology, Husserl proposed some crucial changes in its conceptualization. According to him, experiences are directed towards entities which are both mental and non-mental. He argues that in the experience of colour, we see coloured things and not mere colour sensations. He maintains that, entities like physical objects, persons, numbers which are not spatio-temporal, particulars like the patch of blue, universals like blueness, states of affairs, mental entities like thoughts, images and feelings, etc., can become an intentional object. In this

sense he takes phenomenology and the principle of intentionality beyond what Brentano intended it to be.

Husserl's Phenomenology

Husserl's phenomenology is not confined to a mere philosophical doctrine about the nature of consciousness and the essences that are directly given to it. Instead, it proposes a method to isolate this directly given essences. The central concern of phenomenology aims at isolating the essential aspects which constitute meanings. In other words, it seeks to isolate the essences. Everything perceived is bound up with the essence of perception which is different from the object that exists in nature.

Husserl argues that every intentional experience gives meaning. In other words, intentional experiences have the essential characteristic of giving some meaning. The fundamental aim of phenomenology is to grasp the perceived as such. It tries to grasp what is essentially given. The task of phenomenology is to capture the phenomenon as meant. Phenomenology searches for essences in the consciousness, which is the domain of essences. It searches for pure mental processes which are immanent to the sphere of consciousness that investigates them. The ultimate focus is on pure consciousness.

The various mental processes like remembering, imagining, judging, willing, describing, feeling, perceiving etc. have their own essences. The phenomenological method examines these essences, by excluding what do not lie in the mental act itself. It thus builds a science of essences. In order to find the essence of consciousness, phenomenology excludes what is non-essence. For this the major hurdle is the natural attitude, which a phenomenologist has to overcome.

The natural attitude is characteristic of both our everyday life and ordinary science. The natural attitude is the taken for granted attitude we adopt in our day to day life and in our scientific theorizing endeavours about the world. This is our usual way of existing, by believing and taking for granted the reality of the objects of our experience such as physical objects, other people, and even ideas. We simply believe in their existence and never question this belief. We take

them as “just there” and do not question their existence. In other words, we view the objects of consciousness as factual items. According to Husserl, the genuine philosophical attitude opposes this view. While the natural attitude accepts the possibility of knowledge as a self-evident fact, philosophy raises doubts about such assumptions. It affirms that the self-evident givenness of objects of our natural attitude can be questioned.

Husserl proposes to overcome the natural attitude by suspending the spatio-temporal world and focusing on pure mental processes. This process is called the phenomenological reduction, which involves a process of bracketing or *Epoche* which is the Greek word for cessation. This process of reduction aims at excluding all that is not genuinely immanent from the sphere of absolute data. What is intended is adequately given in itself.

The process of bracketing involves a suspension of inquiry. It suspends the object's status as reality and therefore, involves a neutralization of belief. It sets aside everything that is external, and the prejudices that we associate with the reality of the world. The phenomenological method thus concentrates only on the inner content of our conscious acts. It tries to isolate what is remembered in the act of remembering, imagined in the act of imagination, perceived in the act of perception etc.

According to Husserl, the process of reduction has two broad phases: phenomenological and transcendental. The phenomenological reduction attempts to focus on pure consciousness and it describes objects not in their natural causal relations, but as they appear in the consciousness. Hence it is called phenomenological. Transcendental reduction on the other hand deals with the conditions that make any knowledge possible.

According to Husserl, there are three types of reduction: the phenomenological-psychological reduction, eidetic reduction and transcendental reduction. The phenomenological-psychological reduction is conceived as the gateway to the right form of phenomenological attitude from natural attitude. The natural attitude is bracketed at this stage and it contains the description of mental acts free of theories and presuppositions. It also refrains from taking any natural-objective position.

The second type of reduction is eidetic, where the individual existence of the object in question is bracketed, since phenomenology is interested only in the essence. The *idos* or essences are evaluated at this stage. The focus here is on properties, kinds, or types and the ideal species that entities may exemplify. This process involves a free variation of the individuals in our imagination. With this it finds out what characteristics these things have in common. It locates the invariant forms which are essences.

These two stages of reduction together set the stage for what is described as the ultimate goal of phenomenological method; the isolation of the Transcendental subjectivity. As Spiegelberg observes:

It indicates that reduction has the purpose to inhibit and “take back,” as it were, all references to the “transcendent” as the intentional correlate of our acts and to trace them back to the immanent or “transcendental” acts in which they have their source. [Vol. I, p. 136]

Husserl observes that without consciousness there would not be a world at all and according to him, phenomenology has to study the realm of pure consciousness and the essential formations found there.

The Transcendental Reduction and the Transcendental Ego

Husserl argues that since the basic approaches of the reductions that involve suspension or bracketing are negative—in psychological-phenomenological and eidetic reductions—we need to adopt more positive approaches. We need to specify in what direction the reductions head to. The first two reductions move away from the natural world, and do not specify what phenomenological reduction ultimately heads to. Husserl here affirms that transcendental subjectivity is the ultimate goal of the phenomenological method.

Since isolating the transcendental ego is the ultimate goal of phenomenology, Husserl argues that a proper understanding of the ego is essential in carrying out the phenomenological exercise. He says that there is a fundamental problem with our understanding about the ego. The ego is usually conceived as the essentially nonphysical entity, which is causally interacting with the physical. We often understand the ego and its acts in naturalistic terms. The talk of the ego and its experiences presuppose the natural attitude, which

phenomenology tries to overcome. Hence it is important that we should bracket to the ego as well. This happens in the third stage of reduction, which is known as the transcendental reduction.

In transcendental reduction, we bracket the ego and its intentions. We then cease to affirm the existence of the ego as a psychological reality. In other words, the empirical or psychological ego has to be set aside. Husserl writes:

By phenomenological *epoche* I reduce my natural human Ego and psychic life - the realms of my *psychological self-experience* - to my transcendental phenomenological Ego, the realm of *transcendental phenomenological self-experience*. [*Cartesian Meditations*, p.26]

The transcendental reduction proceeds with a bracketing of the ego and its intentions. This stage ceases to affirm the existence of the ego as a psychological reality. With this we may get access to the transcendental subjectivity or the transcendental ego. Husserl believed that the *epoché* that brackets the empirical elements in consciousness would finally leaves only the transcendental ego and its pure acts. According to him, the reflection on these transcendental elements of consciousness is pure or transcendental reflection. He thought that we have direct access to this transcendental subjectivity through a transcendental experience and *epoche* is a form of transcendental experience. The transcendental ego and its pure acts are the residue of transcendental reduction.

Husserl says that, while every *cogitato* come and go, the pure ego appears to be necessary in principle. It remains absolutely self-identical in all possible changes of experience. Husserl asserts that the pure Ego is the necessary prerequisite for experience to occur. With the transcendental reduction of the empirical ego, we enter into the domain of meaning, not the consciousness of an individual human, but the essence of all meaning-making.

The notion of transcendental ego and the idea of transcendental reduction are the most interesting and the most problematic aspects of Husserl's philosophy. Though Husserl considered these ideas as the most important constituents of his philosophy, none of his disciples have shown interest in further developing them. Husserl was reported to have stated once that even after his death, his transcendental ego might exist, as it is eternal. In this sense phenomenology is ultimately a philosophy of the self.

Quiz

1. Which among the following is not the way in which Husserl has conceived phenomenology?
(a) As epistemology (b) Science of sciences (c) First philosophy (d) Transcendental idealism.
2. According to Husserl, experiences are directed towards entities which are.....?
(a) Mental alone (b) Non-mental alone (c) Neither mental nor non-mental (d) Both mental and non-mental.
3. Which of the following statements are true about Husserl's concept of phenomenology?
(i) It grasps the mental concepts
(ii) It grasps what is essentially given
(iii) It captures the phenomenon as it is stated by the sciences
(iv) It searches for concepts in the consciousness
(v) It searches for pure mental processes.
(vi) Its ultimate focus is on pure consciousness.
(a) (vi) alone (b) (ii), (v) and (vi) (c) (i), (ii) and (vi) (d) (ii), (iii) and (vi)
4. Which of the following is not involved in the process of bracketing?
(a) Suspension of inquiry (b) Takes for granted the existence of the world and its objects (c) Suspends the object's status as reality (d) Neutralization of belief.
5. What happens during eidetic reduction?
(a) Freedom from natural attitude (b) Description of mental acts free of theories and presuppositions (c) locates the invariant forms (d) Refrains from taking any natural-objective position.

Answer Key

1. [a]
2. [d]
3. [c]
4. [b]
5. [c]

Assignments

1. Describe the principle of intentionality and its role in phenomenology.
2. Discuss Husserl's notion of phenomenological reduction.

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